

Interpretation Education and Fire - Connecting to NPS Programs

Neil DeJong, Chief of Interpretation and Education, Intermountain Regional Office

Neil began his presentation by having staff read the following quotes (See attached quotes) regarding education and interpretation. He pointed out that the many quotes that came from mission statements, policies, high-level NPS staff often conflicted with each other, but that they shared many of the same key words such as connecting, opportunities, and communication. He said a program should not always be so concerned about who says what, but that the strategic plan and general meaning need to be consistent.

With regard to the quotes, Neil noted that the quotes had words and meanings that were both tangible and intangible, strongly linked together. As an example, he requested the tangible and intangible words and concepts related to fire shelters.

Fire shelter “Tangibles” (examples)

- Aluminum
- Weighs a couple pounds
- Has a yellow carrying case

Fire shelter “Intangibles” (examples)

- Requirement
- Survival
- Comfort
- Fear
- Training
- A sense of security
- Death
- Acceptance of risk/mitigation
- Safety

Of the intangibles there were words that everyone can relate to and understand, these are called “Universal Concepts.” Examples include:

- Death
- Survival
- Fear
- Safety

Neil addressed that the best way to relate tangibles to intangibles is through universal concepts. This is important when trying to explain a subject like fire to a variety of audiences outside of the fire world. The reason behind the success of Karen Wade’s interview was she presented her points in plain language to the universal concepts of sadness, pain, and sorrow the public was feeling.

It is important to keep this in mind when trying to reach audiences with fire messages. An example is that homeowners in life-long learning and students in curriculum-based education

programs can be included as part of the fire education program. Take stock of resources that are already in place such as the park's education specialist who may have tools and systems in place you can take advantage of for fire education programs. They can train teachers to take messages to students and outside communities. The same is true of the general interpretation staff. You can use their programs and tools to reach communities and community leaders.

One advantage of having a young program like the Fire Communication and Education Program is the freedom to break new ground. Older NPS programs do not allow flexibility, but with the fire education efforts there are fewer constraints that allow for tremendous opportunities. He encouraged people to think outside the box and to come up with new ways to get the fire messages out.